Steps Toward a North American Migration Survey

Lessons Learned from the
U.S. Census Bureau's
Migrant Life History Project (MLHP)

Maritsa V. Poros
Kaari Flagstad Baluja

2003 Meetings of the American Statistical Association

Three Main Purposes of the MLHP

- Identify limitations and gaps in existing data used for intercensal demographic estimates.

- Provide a basis for proposing revisions to survey content to improve demographic estimates and the quality of survey data on the foreign born.

- Address the economic, political, and social impact of migrants on American society.

MLHP Data and Sample

- 300 life histories of migrants residing in Washington, D.C., New York, and Los Angeles. (N=121 so far).

- 12 sending countries: China, India, Russia (and former USSR), Nigeria, Bosnia, Germany, Iran, Mexico, Haiti, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Colombia.

Sample Representativeness

	MLHP	CPS (Mar 2002) Foreign Born
Age	41 (median)	38 (median)
Sex	49% Male 51% Female	49% Male 51% Female
Citizenship	26% US citizen	43% US citizen
Education	54% Bachelor's Degree or higher	27% Bachelor's Degree or higher

Evaluation of Current Questions used in U.S. Census Surveys

- Place of Birth
- Citizenship Status
- Year of Entry
- Language Spoken
- Ancestry/Ethnic Identification

Place of Birth

- A survey question, which does not ask detail on one's place of birth, can lead to ambiguous political/national designations.

- "I was born in 69 in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and um, what I remember, it was actually nice living there. It was still called Yugoslavia until 92." (From interview, 3/2003, New York).

Citizenship Status

- While most respondents have remained citizens of their countries of birth or become US citizens, two were citizens of other countries (Canada and Guatemala).

- Dual citizenship is also increasingly common among those respondents born in Colombia, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. Of 25 respondents from those 3 countries recorded thus far, 40% reported to be dual citizens.

Year of Entry

- One entry   72%
- Two entries   20%
- Three or more entries   1.7%

   (missing values = 4)

   That 22% of the sample show more than one entry into the US suggests that the current survey question on year of entry is an inadequate measure and likely to be confusing to respondents who have entered the US multiple times.

Language Spoken

- The current question on language asks respondents about English language ability and to name one language other than English spoken at home.

- Respondents in the MLHP spoke up to 7 languages, and 37% spoke 3 or more languages. These data suggest that the foreign-born population is likely to be more multilingual than the question on language allows for in its response.

Ancestry/Ethnic Identification

- The MLHP shows that ancestry and ethnic or cultural identification continue to be variable and fluid for many of the respondents. Salient markers of identity include not only ancestry, race, and nationality, but also religious, regional and political attachments.

- These identities overlap and exist simultaneously in the respondent's lives as they respond to different life situations and experiences. Respondents rarely express their identity in terms of fixed categories.

Ancestry/Ethnic Identification

- Interviewer: "When you speak of your identity or ethnicity, how do you think of yourself..?"

- Respondent: "I am Colombian. Here, we acquire the term "Latino," because in my country we don't think of ourselves as Latinos. But here the "Latino" is very stigmatized…One prefers to say he is Colombian. Since I feel Colombian myself, American because I live in America, I lived in America, South America… but I am Latino and I try to..defend a little that image. As Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans have done... (From interview 4/2003, Washington, DC)

Ancestry/Ethnic Identification

- Interviewer: "So you would identify yourself as…how would you describe yourself?"

- Respondent: "Sarajevan…I grew up as a Yugoslav. I was totally fine being a Yugoslav. Then, Yugoslavia was disseminated and so I became a Bosnian because I'm…I became holder of the Bosnian pass, and I don't mind being a Bosnian but the identity I have, the Bosnian identity is something that's imposed on me…I would always say that I am a Bosnian national…because it is politically correct but Sarajevan is something that is dear to me." (From interview, 2/2003, New York)

U S C E N S U S B U R E A U
Helping You Make Informed Decisions

12

Lessons Learned from the MLHP

- Current questions do not adequately capture salient characteristics of the foreign-born population, such as place of birth, citizenship status, year of entry, language spoken, and ancestry, ethnicity or other identities.

- The results of the MLHP also suggest several new areas of attention in order to field a North American Migration (or broader migration) Survey. That survey should include revisions of existing questions and new areas of investigation.

U S C E N S U S B U R E A U
Helping You Make Informed Decisions

Towards a North American Migration Survey

- A North American Migration Survey must account for the size, characteristics, and impact of migration flows across North America with high reliability and validity.

- Adapting current questions from existing surveys in the US, Canada, and Mexico may pose weaknesses for achieving that goal.

- Data from the MLHP suggest that issues such as remittances, health, migrant networks, and household change are important for measuring size, characteristics, and impact.

U S C E N S U S B U R E A U
Helping You Make Informed Decisions

Operational Issues

- Sampling frame.

- Achieving high cooperation and response rates. (Resistance/suspicion of cooperative state ventures).

- Linguistic administration of survey and translation of key concepts.

Implications of a North American Migration Survey

- A North American Migration Survey could vastly improve estimates of the migrant populations between the three countries.

- First step towards developing and implementing broader migration surveys within countries (or cooperatively across countries).

- Opportunity to address existing and new issues regarding the impact of migration in North America with regard to particular country concerns.

Contact Information

Maritsa Poros (poros@iit.edu)

Kaari Baluja (kaari.f.baluja@census.gov)

USCENSUSBUREAU
Helping You Make Informed Decisions